

**TOWN OF NORTHFIELD, VERMONT**  
**PLANNING COMMISSION**  
**Minutes of April 7, 2021**  
**Planning Commission Meeting**

In keeping with Governor Phil Scott's COVID-19 "stay at home" directive, the meeting was held remotely.

The meeting was called to order at 7:00 pm by Chair Hill-Eubanks.

**Roll Call:** Present for the meeting were Commissioners Laura Hill-Eubanks, Ruth Ruttenberg, Nancy Peck and Chandra Blackmer. Aaron Rhodes was absent. Also present were Clerk Mitch Osiecki; Bill Smith, chair of the Northfield Development Review Board (DRB), and resident Gordon Bock.

**Public Participation:** Introductions were made and guests were welcomed to the meeting.

**Set/Adjust Agenda:** None

**Zoning Regulation Updates:** Bill Smith shared with the Planning Commission some preliminary thoughts on areas of the Zoning Regulations that might need to be modified in light of updates that are in the legislative pipeline. Bill offered no specific suggestions at this point, but mentioned a few broad areas where changes are in the works:

- Increased flexibility for use of Accessory Dwelling Units (ADU's);
- Allow for greater density in some more populated areas (increase "infill");
- Narrowing of the ability to regulate the content of signage.

Town Manager Jeff Smith has submitted some applications for a couple of grants that could have the potential to increase municipal infrastructure.

Ruth Ruttenberg asked for clarification about changes to ADU regulations.

State Law currently defines an ADU as (paraphrasing): "one-bedroom or efficiency apartment not more than the greater of 600 square feet or 30% of the livable space of the principal dwelling." Northfield regulations do not include the restriction limiting an ADU to 30% of the principal dwelling.

Proposed changes to State Law would increase the permissible size of an ADU to the greater of 900 square feet or 40% of the livable space of the principal dwelling.

Laura Hill Eubanks asked whether current subdivision regulations are working well and whether there might be a benefit in tightening any regulations.

Mitch responded that, over the past two or three years, subdivision activity has been fairly stable. We've had three or four subdivision applications per year, most of which have sought one new lot. Generally speaking, subdivisions do not seem to have posed any particular challenges or undue pressure on land use development.

Bill discussed Act 179, which will allow multi-family dwellings of up to 4-units. Local zoning used to be able to deny such a structure solely on the basis of an adverse effect on "the character of the neighborhood." The proposed statute will not permit denial of a 4-unit dwelling based on solely of character of neighborhood criteria.

Ruth Ruttenberg commented that a primary concern for her is the potential conversion of older, large single-family dwellings in the downtown and University areas.

Bill will forward text of this statute explaining these changes in greater detail.

Bill commented that there are other bases upon which 4-unit dwellings could still be denied, such as:

- Lack of adequate parking;
- Sewer/Water capacity;
- Public safety;
- Historic preservation.

To the last item, it might be possible to create a historic overlay district that could provide the basis for further oversight of multi-unit apartment conversions.

Ruth asked Bill for his thoughts regarding the 90 square foot/40% restrictions on ADU's.

Bill responded that it depends on what the community views as appropriate development of property.

Do we want to permit two principal dwellings per lot? Probably not.

Bill's inclination is that the 900 square foot/40% limit will likely serve the needs of the vast majority of residents.

Ruth Ruttenberg asked about PUD regulations.

Mitch offered the observation that PUD regulations are often found to be complicated and confusing by potential applicants. Suggested that, for example, someone from Department of Housing & Community Development might be able to offer guidance about the ideal use of PUD's.

The main idea of a PUD is to cluster housing on a smaller footprint of a parcel of land, and to preserve larger tracts of forest and wildlife habitat.

Ruth wondered if PUD's could have some role to play in promoting affordable housing.

Ruth suggested that, while the PC and DRB have different roles to play, it is desirable that revised regulations serve both bodies so that they can work as a strong team.

Nancy Peck asked if the role of the DRB is guided by zoning regulations.

Response: yes, as long as the regulations don't conflict with state statute.

Bill Smith departed the meeting.

Gordon Bock joined the meeting to discuss a concern over an area that zoning regulations don't appear to cover. He ran into an issue a few years back where a neighbor erected a tall scaffolding structure and hung lights from it, and engaged in harassing behavior toward his family.

He asked whether "temporary structures" such as this type of scaffolding can be regulated by zoning bylaws.

Mitch responded that the situation described us highly unique, but that he'd be happy to do some research into the issue.

Review of Articles I & II.

For next meeting, Mitch will learn how to use screen-sharing in GoToMeeting and how to put documents on display for all users to view.

Chandra Blackmer observed that she doesn't care for the formatting of current regulations, particularly the use of roman numerals for the articles. Purely a stylistic choice – can be changed.

Ruth Ruttenberg noted that she doesn't like that the Town Forest is in the Low Density Residential Zoning District. Would much prefer something like a forest overlay district.

Potential research project: lots of towns have a town forest. How do others restrict development potential in their Town Forest?

**Approval of Minutes:** Tabled until May meeting.

**Other Business:** Nancy Peck briefed PC on some issues the Northfield Ridges & River Routes committee is dealing with. Two primary concerns of the group are:

- Connecting Northfield Falls to Northfield;
- Access to the Town Forest.

A few vocal residents have raised concerns about a proposal to add parking in a residential neighborhood. Ruth stated that the issue is not really about parking, but rather whether the Town Forest should be available to all residents, or if it's intended to be an outdoor destination location that attracts non-residents to the community.

**Next Regular Meeting:** May 5, 2021 at 7:00 pm.

**Adjournment:** Ruttenberg moved to adjourn; Blackmer seconded. **Motion passed, 4-0.**

Meeting adjourned at 8:43 pm.